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Nineteenth-Century Latin America**



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Scandal and Gender in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century Latin America

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Introduction

Scandal is a common currency in the age of social media and constant newsfeeds; its persistent presence might imply that it is not of scholarly importance but the ruptures it caused allow historians to capture the social dynamics of past societies. In earlier periods of Latin American history, the scandals of the day intruded in tangible manners on the lives of the protagonists in ways that hemmed them in and could impose social norms and morality. The disgrace of being talked of or written about, being brought before court officials, and/or being shunned and punished allowed for the reinforcement of societal and gender norms that can be particularly useful to historians. In this period, Church and State imposed a gender binary with clear roles for both men and women along with proper deportment, dress, and occupations. Women also demonstrated proper behaviour in more subtle manners such as bodily submission through lowered eyes and heads, a demure walk, and quiet disposition. In this issue, we explore the intersections of gender and scandal in order to shed light on the inner workings of colonial and early nineteenth-century Latin American societies. Although each article explores a discrete topic and has a regional focus, the essays provide certain threads that can guide us into an understanding of the connections between scandal and gender. The authors explore the edges of the acceptable and the ways in which gender norms were breached causing scandal. These ruptures tell us a lot about rules and the ways that people experienced, lived, and performed gender in colonial and early republican Latin America.

Scandals denote misbehaviour—a flouting of conventions that inflames disgust and horror among those who are witnesses. They are

as, Vanessa Freije and Ari Adut note “disruptive”¹ and because of the disturbance they caused, they often enter into the historical record. Historical sources used for these articles include court records, letters, Inquisition cases, and newspaper articles. Scandals, in their most simple form, are just a transgression, its dissemination, and the shocked public. But, in many situations, the transgressive actions or events lead to the involvement of institutions.² In the articles in this special issue, these institutions include the Church hierarchy, the court system, and the Holy Office of the Inquisition. In the periods addressed, denunciations that created scandal allowed those outside the scandal to have the high moral ground. At the same time, as anthropologist Max Gluckman notes scandals and the gossip that accompanied them were important in establishing community values and also in forging social unity.³ Although scandal and the associated gossip might be dismissed as light weight, in fact these elements performed societally important roles. They allowed certain groups to take the moral high ground and they forged community values and cohesion.

The articles in this special issue illustrate that a scandal is a malleable and complex phenomenon; scandals not only changed within their historical contexts, but they also were constructed within diverse categories such as gender, race, social rank, and the dynamics of power. Even though the definition of “scandal” in seventeenth to nineteenth-century Spanish dictionaries remained the same—comprising on one hand of spiritual or moral ruin and on the other, as turmoil, uproar, and disturbances—the practices that were considered “scandalous” in the Latin American context present subtle nuances in different times.⁴ Reuben Zahler extends the discussion of the changing definition and understanding of the word “scandal” in his article. During the first

¹ Vanessa Freije, *Citizens of Scandal: Journalism, Secrecy, and the Politics of Reckoning in Mexico*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, p. 15; Ari Adut, *On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics, and Art*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 3.

² Adut, *On Scandal*, p. 17.

³ Max Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal”: *Current Anthropology*, 4: 3 (1963), pp. 308-309.

⁴ Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de Autoridades*, Madrid: Imprenta de la Real Academia Española, 1732, p. 553; Ramón Joaquín Domínguez, *Diccionario Nacional o Gran Diccionario Clásico de la Lengua Española*, Madrid / París: Establecimiento de Mellado, 1853 (1846-1847), p. 713.

centuries of colonialism, well-known scandals often targeted clerics who strayed from prescribed conduct such as Father Miguel de Palmares, as documented by Linda Curcio-Nagy and the nuns of Popayán in the article by Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez, but by the eighteenth century it was the laity whose scandalous acts included sexual transgressions as well as drunkenness and violence that prevailed in daily discourse.⁵

Gender is at the heart of community values; it reflects the inherited norms that were imposed by institutions such as the Church and State. The construction and performance of gender in the accepted manner was a way of denoting agreement with these norms. The articles begin in the colonial period with Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez' exploration of the sacrilegious acts of the nuns of the Convent of La Encarnación in the seventeenth century such as entertaining men within convent walls and sexual acts. The sisters' conduct would have been transgressive even if they had not taken vows of chastity, but this only intensified the shock value. The events entangled the nuns' violations with the community but also the masculine authority of the bishop and other clerical officials which in itself became scandalous because of the bishop's excesses. Similarly, Linda Curcio-Nagy shows how Doña Josefa de Angulo, in seventeenth-century New Spain, despite her gender and youth, and to the astonishment of observers embraced a life of what was considered dissolute: she delighted in going to the theater, acting, poetry recitals, friendships with men other than her husband, gambling, and partying. Even when she was confined within the walls of the Recogimiento de la Magdalena, a home for wayward women that was akin to a prison, she found allies who allowed her to continue her "dissolute" lifestyle. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera focusses on the reasons and mechanisms that families in eighteenth-century Mexico City used to denounce their insubordinate sons as vagrants. Using a new variant on the old laws of vagrancy, these

⁵ Pablo Rodríguez, "Escándalo y pasión en Los Andes. El romance del virrey Amat y la actriz Micaela Villegas": Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru (coord.), *Amor e historia. La expresión de los afectos en el mundo de ayer*, México D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2013, pp. 109-120; Lourdes Villafuerte, "Lo malo no es el pecado sino el escándalo: Un caso de adulterio en la Ciudad de México": Dolores Enciso Rojas et. al., *Senderos de palabras y silencios. Formas de comunicación en la Nueva España*, México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000, pp. 99-112.

parents and guardians tried to rein in the conduct of the young men but also, by doing so, took the high moral ground and avoided having their progeny's scandalous behaviour stain them. In his article, Reuben Zahler explores changing concepts of scandal in Venezuela in the late colonial and early republican years, and how female rebellion against gender norms and hierarchies was reined in by society and the courts. He shows how vulnerable women were to accusations of scandalous conduct in this period. Finally, Verónica Undurraga Schüler and Sandra Cristina Montoya Muñoz document a fascinating court case in which a father, dressed as a woman, killed his daughter's rapist. While men often avenged their honor or that of their kinfolk, doing so while assuming a feminine identity was shocking to contemporaries. The scandal that ensued rocked nineteenth-century Chilean society with extensive media coverage and allows the authors to delve into the ways that masculinity was represented and negotiated.

Just as the meaning of the word "scandal" has changed over time, what society considers, scandalous has also evolved. What was once considered abhorrent and sinful often changes in mindsets to be accepted and even embraced to some extent.⁶ The practice that was historically called cross-dressing now seems benign for most people and even celebrated in drag shows and the generally more accepted transgenderism. In their article, Verónica Undurraga Schüler and Sandra C. Montoya Muñoz note when the murderer José Pastor Peña chose to transform himself into a feminine figure—not only dressing as a woman but also adopting a feminized profession—he did so to gain access to his nemesis, his daughter's rapist Manuel Cifuentes, to kill him. The assassination of a prominent politician was bound to provoke sensationalistic coverage but what was most titillating was the fact that Pastor Peña did so in the guise of a woman thus transgressing gender norms. As Linda Curcio-Nagy contends the women confined to the Recojimientto de la Magdalena in seventeenth-century New Spain took great pleasure in various antics including acting in theatre productions in which they took on masculine disguises to act in the male roles. Cross-dressing was not always scandalous—for example, during the Carnival when social inversion was not only accepted but also expected all sorts of norms were shattered. Outside of these times, cross-dressing had to

⁶ As Adut, *On Scandal*, p.11, states "Scandals, however, frequently involve violent condemnations of transgressions that were widely known and tolerated before".

be negotiated to be accepted. Still there are some historic figures such as Catalina de Erauso, known as the ensign nun, whose adoption of the ultimate masculine identity, that of a swash-buckling soldier was celebrated. Yet, cross-dressing challenged the fundamental gender binary which was central to the tenets of the Catholic Church and as such to the State.

Just as the kinds of transgressions that caused scandal have changed over time, the way that people defined what was scandalous has also altered with the years. As Reuben Zahler argues, the term took on different meanings according to the period. Medieval thinkers emphasised that it represented a danger to the souls of those involved thus placing it well within the Church's realm. The connection between the transgressor and those who observed his or her wrongdoings might be tempted into similar acts thus also compromising their souls. The meaning of scandal was modified with changing times. In the middle period, Venezuelans began to add to the definition an association with rebellion or mutiny. Yet this evolving meaning did not veer far from the original as the overturning of social order implied a possible danger to the souls of those involved. Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez's article on the activities of the nuns of the convent of La Encarnación in Popayán, Colombia, echo this reasoning. One of the ways that the holy sisters provoked scandal was that they were rebellious; they did not accept their bishop's authority. Ultimately, despite some variations its definition, the essence of scandal was a challenge to norms and hierarchies.

Gender constructs were at the heart of many scandals that stunned colonial society. In their article on the sinful conduct of the Augustinian nuns of the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación in Popayán, Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez underline that the conventual scandal was not just that the sisters had violated their vows but also that, as women, they had transgressed against the feminine ideal of enclosure and morality—in their case they violated the space of the convent. In contrast, Sonya Lipsett-Rivera reveals how perceptions of the scandalous behaviour of sons of elite families in New Spain contrasted with new ideas about masculinity and thus were transformed into threats against the family honor. Because of shifting concepts of masculine and family honor, conduct that previously would have been deemed the "folly of youth" such as getting drunk, partying,

gambling, womanizing, cheating and lying, or even refusing respectable professions were considered scandalous. These two articles show that the transformation of gender ideals as well as social pressures could result in both men and women having to obey moral and behavioural norms.

One of the fundamental frameworks of morality and rank in colonial and early national Latin American society was the honor code. In theory, honor was most easily attained by legitimate birth into a noble family, but it could also be secured by acts of bravery for men or chaste conduct for women. Yet, as many studies have shown, even the low-born and disadvantaged claimed honor.⁷ Honor colored and structured daily lives of both men and women. It made them govern their bodies in terms of their dress and movements; effectively, they had to perform their gender in ways that did not violate the honor norms. Honor also structured spaces assigning higher or lower qualities to different areas.⁸ Certain spaces were considered sacrosanct, for example, convents and *recogimientos*, thus when the nuns or inmates flouted gender norms and the rules for these institutions, as Linda Curcio-Nagy, Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez all demonstrate in their respective articles, reactions could be harsh. In these examples, people violated the borders between what was considered private and public spaces. For the nuns of Popayán and the rebellious sons of Mexico City, the consequence was exile—the sisters were forced out of the space of their convent and sent to Pasto and Quito while the young men were often banished either to the Philippines or Chile. The family was also another space in which gender hierarchies were supposed to be respected. When sons did not conform to the expectations laid out for them, as Sonya Lipsett-Rivera demonstrates in her article, the family was fractured. In all of these situations, those who observed the transgressions felt an obligation to denounce them. As such, they

⁷ For a seminal study, see: Lyman Johnson / Sonya Lipsett-Rivera (ed.), *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Violence, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Latin America*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998.

⁸ Charles F. Walker, "The Upper Classes and their Upper Stories: Architecture and the Aftermath of the Lima Earthquake of 1746": *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 83, no.1 (2003), pp. 53-82; Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *Gender and the Negotiation of Daily Life in Mexico, 1750-1856*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.

preserved their own honor by bringing attention to the scandalous acts because they situated themselves outside of the sphere of sinful acts.

Within the articles in this special issue, scandals reached a larger public in different ways to a very great extent because of the communication technologies or lack of them. In most of the studies, outrage was inflamed by gossip, or murmurings. Although the documents don't always reveal the actual mechanisms of this communication, people would inevitably meet in different venues: stores, taverns, the market, water fountains and even in church. As gossip spread, it took on importance and those who had observed or knew about the scandalous acts needed to distance themselves from the transgression by denouncing it. Scandals, as Freije states, break the barrier between what is considered private and public knowledge.⁹ In the article by Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez, the authors note that the dissemination of the scandal went beyond simple rumors and was conveyed by attaching pasquines (a crude poster) to city walls. This rather basic form of spreading the word is contrasted to the situation described by Verónica Undurraga Schüler and Sandra C. Montoya Muñoz who describe newspaper campaigns and the sale of pictures of the accused. In this case, we can see the early emergence of celebrity by scandal. Denunciations created scandal but could also be used to control the news and sanction the perpetrators within a social group. But this strategy could backfire on those in charge when the reaction to scandal was overblown as in the use of torture in by clerical authorities in Colombia.

Scandal also often revealed that women were most frequently the victims of scrutiny and the consequent punishment. As Reuben Zahler notes, women, especially single ones, were incredibly vulnerable particularly if they did not obey the sexual norms of the day. Patriarchs, secular and religious authorities tended to rein them in. But the tables could be turned causing even more outrage. As Linda Curcio-Nagy shows, Doña Josefa de Angulo knew how to work the system to her advantage and despite being under the authority of a husband and then later inside a *recogimiento*, she lived with great gusto and *joie de vivre*. Carolina Abadía Quintero and Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez show how, within the larger scandal, racialized servants and enslaved women in

⁹ Freije, *Citizens of Scandal*, p. 15.

the Convent became more powerful because they were able to inform on their social superiors. Verónica Undurraga Schüler and Sandra C. Montoya Muñoz demonstrate how a poor man without social connections or power was able, by guile and clever machinations, get his revenge on a powerful well-connected politician. The scandals at the heart of these articles show how the “weapons of the weak” can be used to turn the tables and show that gender norms could be manipulated under certain circumstances.

Scandals by their very nature are titillating; it is always best to be the shocked spectator than the transgressor. As such, they might not seem worthy of scholarly examination but, as shown in the articles that follow, they provide an opening to plumb the interstices of gender and scandal and to understand social dynamics at discrete moments. The articles in this special issue allow us to follow part of the evolution of the linkages between scandal and gender. In the earlier periods covered, women were the most vulnerable and most likely to suffer but as noted above, both young and older men also could be censured for their conduct. In addition, the meaning of scandal was not static, shifting along with societal values. The means of communicating scandalous acts also changed over time ranging from gossip and rumors to letters and official documents, to pasquines, and finally to newspaper articles. The consequences of being the subject of a scandal could be very serious ranging from exile, torture, jail sentences or it could simply be notoriety. Nonetheless, these articles provide a reconsideration of gender under the lens of scandal.